

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the House of the Lord." - Ps. 122

SEWARD PENINSULA LUTHERAN MINISTRY

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ANCHORAGE

January 25, 2006

The Honorable Judge John W. Sedwick
550 W. 7th Ave. Suite #1600
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Sir:

We are co-pastors at Alaska Native Lutheran Church, where Jeremy Topkok is a member. We have known Jeremy for approximately 10-years. We know him as an intelligent, hard-working young man who connects with youth and has in the past set good goals for himself. We also know him as a member of a family that is deeply committed to him.

To give you an example of his character and talent, he helped immensely in our highschool youth ministry just last year. He, along with one of us, chaperoned ten youth at a retreat at Victory Bible Camp in March and he also chaperoned at 2 "lock-ins" at our church. He was a tremendous help and counselor. Jeremy was someone we could count on as connecting to the youth and challenging them in how they think and plan their lives. We took the youth to see "Hotel Rwanda" and it was Jeremy who initiated the conversation and discussion about the movie and one of its main topics- the wrongness of racism and violence.

Jeremy expressed interest in continuing to help in our youth ministry program. He encouraged the youth to feel good about and proud of their cultural identity and to set goals for themselves. In addition to his involvement with our youth ministry, he was also nominated in 2005 to our Church Council. He narrowly missed being elected and was next in line should we have a vacancy. So, you see, he has broad support within our faith community.

Throughout the past summer, unfortunately, Jeremy began to struggle with alcohol. He knew he needed to get into a treatment program but there was never an immediate opening. He encountered a lot of red-tape and did not have the funds to enter a program. He was told to wait until a "free bed" opened up which is difficult when you are drinking and cannot seem to stop. As professionals we encountered an underfunded system and were not successful in helping him enter into a treatment program. We were all very frustrated.

It is against this background (Jeremy's high potential of being a contributor to society and his struggle with alcohol) that we would like to ask you to consider leniency in his case. We believe Jeremy's behavior this past summer was directly related to his alcoholism.

rather any criminal tendencies . It was totally out of character for him and seemed like a desparate cry for help, albeit totally wrong.

We will be a support for him as pastors and as a faith community in the best ways we can. We hope we will seem him free, walking in recovery and contributing to society as soon as possible.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Revs. C. George and Karen L. Sonray

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3260 Providence Drive Suite 425
Anchorage, Alaska 99508

January 25, 2006

The Honorable Judge John W. Sedwyck
550 West 7th Avenue Suite 1600
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Re: Jeremy Topkok

Your Honor,

It is possible that the Court has only received a one-sided and quite negative report on Jeremy Topkok. So I am writing to emphasize what might not be as well known, namely, how anomalous Jeremy's behavior was the day he was apprehended. I cannot speak to any of the circumstances regarding his summer relapse into alcohol abuse that resulted in this criminal and tragic incident at the bank. However, I do have first-hand knowledge of the usual character and usual orientation of this young Inupiaq man.

Jeremy Topkok has been pursuing a degree in civil engineering at the University of Alaska, Anchorage (UAA). I am an adjunct professor at UAA as well as an associate member of Alaska Native Lutheran Church, the church Jeremy also attends. Given these two sites of overlap as well as mutual respect, Jeremy and I developed a friendship. Often I would drive Jeremy home after church and we had increasingly candid discussions. During our long drives we would talk about school, about his courses, his dreams of a small side business, and about the weighty sense of responsibility Jeremy felt. He knew that he was a very-needed role model for "the younger boys" (many nephews, cousins, as well as church youth). He told me about the Native Studies courses that he taken for enrichment and how meaningful it was for him to discuss those issues related to racism and cultural clashes that had been glossed over in his high school education. He wanted to be a part of the change that he envisioned for the Native community. He wanted to improve life not only himself but for the extended kinship groups; he clearly saw successful pursuit of education as an important piece of this vision.

His choice of clothing matched his emerging sense of the role he was capable of fulfilling. Despite the casual attire of most people at church, Jeremy always attended in a shirt and tie, and often a suit coat as well. That was also his "uniform" at UAA. On occasion we would run into each other in the Cuddy Student Center and he would always be in coat and tie. Because we were both between classes our UAA conversations were brief, but I was consistently struck by Jeremy's "aliveness" on campus. He exuded ambition, positive professional attitude, excited engagement with his course material, and a commitment to hard study. Every time I encountered Jeremy at UAA, I found myself wishing he were heading to my class because he would be such a positive addition.

In late April, Jeremy shared how overwhelmed he felt about grades and finals. He was taking a heavy load of courses. He briefly mentioned "letting off steam" with friends. I wish I had been more alert. I realized belatedly that he needed more academic support during this time of intense stress. Without that support, he apparently relapsed into the "escape" mechanism that unfortunately surrounds him. Family and professional needs caused me to be out of state during much of the summer. When I returned, I was horrified to hear what had happened.

Mixed with the horror is disbelief, for how it appears (criminal with desire to rob a bank) is so far from the actual character of Mr. Topkok when he is sober. His garb at the time of the bank entry hints at the disjunction between this aberrant incident and the life Mr. Topkok had been working so hard to build. The absence of a weapon also indicates absence of an actual sinister intent.

Compounding the horror is the tragedy, for Jeremy embodied one of the brightest hopes for the relocated Seward Peninsula families and for the youth within those families. Jeremy was rising above the substance abuse all around him; he was showing that hard work and care of the next generations (the "way of the elders") really could work in Anchorage and stereotypes could be transcended. Sadly, under pressure, this summer he stumbled and, in his drunken state, he "stumbled" into a bank. Rather than the ordinary penalty that occurs for inebriation – namely, arrest for public intoxication and belligerence – the setting and mumbled demand made him appear like a dangerous criminal. What I hope the Court will fully take into account is that Jeremy Topkok's behavior that fateful day was atypical behavior. The summer drinking binge compromised and obscured the usual good judgment, the exceptional character and the clear emerging promise of this young man.

The Court will be understandably concerned about future relapses. In addition to whatever substance abuse counseling and parole requirements that are imposed, there are also resources at UAA that could mitigate against a future relapse. One obvious avenue of support is a closer alliance with the Native Studies personnel. Through the Native Studies program there is tracking and assistance for students. In short, there are avenues of support that Jeremy did not know about before and these avenues could give needed strategies and assistance during academically stressful periods. Due to the nature of the conviction, Jeremy Topkok will probably have to abandon civil engineering, but other academic degrees and vocations are available to him. His intelligence, his drive and his heart for his culture should not be wasted. I do not ask the Court to ignore the seriousness of what Jeremy did, but I do beg the Court to also not ignore the tremendous positive potential this young man has. He has the character, introspection, and charisma to make profound change in his own life and in his world. I would ask the Court to render a sentence that gives Jeremy Topkok the opportunity to still become the transformative role-model and leader that he was previously working toward and is capable of being.

Respectfully,



Kristin Helweg Hanson, Ph.D.